A Veterans Oral History

Heritage Education Commission
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Robert Mordecai
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Could you state your name and service?

RM: Robert Mordecai and U. S. Navy during Korea, 1953-56. I ended up as a Lieutenant JG. I got my commission from OCS Newport, Rhode Island, in July of '53. Then I went to the Howard W. Gilmore submarine tender in Key West, Florida. And was there in communications until 1955.

The Navy sent out a request for junior officers for the training centers, so I was transferred from Key West to Bainbridge, Maryland. I was a battalion commander with recruits in barracks, 85 per floor. Two floors made up then one battalion for recruit training purposes. That's what I was in charge of. Then the last two months I was there, the assistant regimental commander got transferred so they moved me over to that billet. And there I was in charge of 2,500 recruits at the age of 25.

LJ: Wow.

RM: That's it.

LJ: Let's kind of back up to the very beginning. Bob where were you born?

RM: Boston, Massachusetts.

LJ: What did your parents do?

RM: My dad was a life insurance agent for the Northwestern Mutual and my mother was a housewife.

LJ: Where did you go to school?

RM: I went to the John Ward School in Newton, Massachusetts. It's a grade school. I found out three years ago, that when I was in the first grade a young man you may

have heard of was in the sixth grade. His name was Jack Lemmon. I didn't know that. But who would know?

I went to junior high, the name escapes me, and then went to Newton High School, and my senior year I did at Tabor Academy at Marion, Massachusetts. I graduated from there.

LJ: What did you do after high school?

RM: Then went to college at Ripon College, Ripon, Wisconsin, 1947 to 1951.

LJ: What brought you from Massachusetts to Wisconsin for college?

RM: Oh, very interesting. I'm a senior in high school and I had not a clue as to where to apply for college. It was right after the war. Veterans are coming back. My dad had a client at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT. His name was Carl Compton. He was the president of the University, very famous man. My dad made an appointment for me to see him, because if anybody would know where to go, Dr. Compton would know.

I got the usual thing from my dad, make sure you watch what you're say, brush your teeth, make sure your tie is on straight, don't smoke, whatever, I don't know. So I am really nervous. I showed up at MIT. Third floor of the building, if you've ever seen a picture of it, was all executive offices and at the very end of the building was where the president's office was. The secretary out introduced me to his secretary, and then, I was escorted into Dr. Compton's office. I didn't know what to expect. I walked in. Here's a guy with his sleeves rolled up, tie down to here, cigar in his mouth, and his first thing was, "You must be Bob. How the hell are you?" And I thought oh my goodness. He said what – so we sat down. He said, "You want a cigar," and I said, "No thanks." He said, "What can I do for you?" So I told him and he said, "Easy. Don't come to a place like this. This is a factory. Get your college degree. Go to a liberal arts college and get an education. Grow up a little bit. Get a little maturity and then when you've done all that, that's the time." And he gave me a list of five or six schools, one of which was Ripon. I found out afterwards they had a working agreement. So we were going to Milwaukee anyway for something else. We stopped in, interviewed, got accepted. That's how I got there.

LJ: You graduated then from Ripon?

RM: From Ripon.

LJ: What was your college degree?

RM: I got a Bachelor of Arts degree in chemistry. I never used it.

LJ: What happened after college?

RM: I tried graduate school for a couple of years without any success at all. First as a medical student at Boston, University. You may have heard of a man by the name of Isaac Asimof, the science fiction writer. I got to know him pretty well, crazy man. That's a whole story in itself. And then I went to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School for business administration. That lasted the first semester. I flunked out. I couldn't do it. So now what do I do, either be drafted or ? Well, I went into the Navy. That or being a foot soldier. I didn't want to do that.

LJ: What intrigued you about enlisting in the Navy.

RM: Well the choice was so much better. And oceans are always fascinating. I love being out there. In fact you go out in the middle of the ocean 600 miles from nowhere, you can't stay awake. I mean the motion, oh it's wonderful.

LJ: Where did you go to training?

RM: Training was Newport, Rhode Island. A couple of guys that I had met in Boston – Newton – the three of us drove down there. We showed up where you were supposed to and then the captain, Navy captain came out. I think of all there was about 6-700 of us there. It's all very relaxed and welcome aboard, da, da, da. And then when we were done step outside and we'll get you sworn in and go from there. Okay? Which we did and as they say, then it really hit the fan. We were assigned to barracks and for four months we lived a very rigid schedule. You can see this on YouTube. What they are doing now is no way near what little we did. I could never go through it today, couldn't be done.

LJ: Why do you say that?

RM: Well, the schedule today is divided up into four segments of four weeks each. First four weeks is nothing but physical training. Second four weeks is Navy whatever subjects and so on. Third four weeks is officer training. The last four weeks is putting your officer training to use by putting you in charge of the new ones coming for the first four weeks. And that cycle continues to repeat itself. There are two men to a room and the rooms are much better than what we had.

LJ: Now how many men are in a barrack?

RM: The Navy recruits – we had 85 to a floor. Instead of calling it a floor, they called it a deck. Eighty-five on each floor and that's 170 and there were five buildings like that.

LJ: How many weeks in training did you have?

RM: I had 16 weeks.

LJ: What was that like?

RM: Looking back pretty easy, relatively speaking. We started out the first thing that you did was you had to take a swimming test which consisted of getting up on a 10 meter board - that's 40 feet off the water. And I'm nervous just being at this height, forget about jumping into a pool.

LJ: Were you a swimmer?

RM: No, if you can't swim when you train, you can't get in there. That's it. They'll give you a general discharge. So you take off your boots, tie the laces together, put them around your neck, step off, swim 50 feet, whatever it is, down one end, turn around, swim back, that's your test. If you can't do it, then they put you in a special class. If you can't do that, you're out.

LJ: What was that like for you, being a non-swimmer.

RM: Oh, I'm a swimmer. And then after that, change clothes and then we went and got our shots. We got two in each arm. The way they did it, the syringe held enough for who knows how many people. Just kept changing needles. So they give you a syringe that's about a foot long and I don't know, it's enough for a horse. And now you start. That's the way it is.

LJ: Any buddy stories stand out during those 16 weeks of training.

RM: One of the things, you were assigned to four a barrack – a room. Barely enough room to turn around in the room.

LJ: And there's four of you in there?

RM: Four, double deck bunks - two and two. And each week one of us was assigned to be the guy that made sure that place was neat. My turn, I had five points off for unseen dirt. True story. And when I got commissioned, I mentioned that to the chief and he kind of laughed.

LJ: After your 16 weeks in Rhode Island.

RM: Yes.

LJ: Then where did you go?

RM: Then I was sent to Key West, assigned to the Howard W. Gilmore submarine tender. They no longer exist because it was an atomic fleet. That's in the communication's division. And my first job was I had to learn how to type. I never

learned how to type. So I spent six hours a day for two months learning how to type.

LJ: Wow.

RM: That's what I did.

LJ: How big was the ship?

RM: It's on your thing there, but it's about 600 feet long. And maybe 60 feet wide or something like that. In wartime it will hold about 800-900 people. Now when I was on it, there was about 600.

LJ: What was life like on that ship?

RM: We tied up at Key West. About once a month, maybe every month and a half we'd go out for someplace. Nothing major.

LJ: How long were you there docked out in Key West?

RM: In Key West, the fall of 1955, I think that's when I got transferred to Bainbridge.

LJ: Where is Bainbridge?

RM: Maryland. Yes, the Navy had, I think still has three training centers: Bainbridge, Maryland; Chicago, and San Diego is the other one. The Great Lakes is the one near Chicago. So there are three.

LJ: How long were you down in Bainbridge?

RM: I went from roughly October of 1955 to May of 1956 when I got separated from the service. Then under my contract, I was required to stay in the active reserves for five years. That lasted a year and then I was given the option of signing out if I wanted too, or stay, so I signed out.

LJ: How long down in Bainbridge?

RM: Well whenever that was October of 1955 to June or May of 1956.

LJ: Did you have any orders overseas?

RM: No.

LJ: Were you happy about that, no doubt?

RM: Perfect, I didn't want to get into a war zone.

LJ: Could live with that?

RM: I can manage without that.

LJ: After Bainbridge, where did life take you?

RM: Then went back to Boston and went into the life insurance business. My dad was an agent at that time for the Northwestern, so that's the kind of work I did. And I wasn't getting anywhere particularly. My brother had gone to Denver after he got out of the service. He went in the Army, so I thought well what the heck. Single why not, so I hopped in the car and drove out to Denver. And that's where I started work.

LJ: Did you eventually marry or have children.

RM: Oh, yeah. I got married out there. Shall I tell you how I met my wife, is that worthwhile?

LJ: If you want to share that would be great.

RM: Oh, okay. My brother was kind of a wild man. Anyway, two of his clients happened to be M. D.'s. They do life insurance exams. And the excuse was that he needed to bring some papers over there. I found out afterwards what he was doing to introduce me to the gal, I later married. But anyway, so we get over there late that morning, and then at that time x-ray technicians was all like – it was not the computer stuff we have now. It's all done like photographs. So she showed up. I showed up. She wasn't particularly thrilled with the fact that I saw her with this sloppy lab coat and on and on; but in spite of that, I stuck my neck out and said, "Do you know how I can apologize and maybe come out for a cup of coffee tomorrow or something?" So we went out on a Wednesday, went out on a Friday, and she got home Saturday night and told her folks she had met the man she was going to marry - I found this out a year and a half later. So that lasted almost 52 years.

LJ: That's wonderful. Good for you? Do you keep in contact with any of the people you served with in the military?

RM: No, I have no idea where they would be.

LJ: Did you go to any reunions?

RM: No, I was done. Remember I got out when I was 25. The commanding officer, Captain Nichols was in his early 40's. Commander Hinkston, who was executive officer, was in his late 30's. These were all people off the submarine fleet World

War II. So you know, they would not be alive at this point. I still remember our chaplain was George Felder, good Lutheran man. Anyway that's another story.

LJ: Any stories you'd like to share with us?

RM: Yes, which was kind of interesting to me. We had on the intercom system to give an evening prayer at 10 o'clock every night. I thought it was all a bunch of hooey anyway. I didn't believe it. I thought religion was a big waste of time. Anyway that's the way I felt. We went up to Newfoundland. The ship went up to Newfoundland in the summer of 1954, I believe. Anyway it was Hurricane Carol we hit on the way back. It cleaned off everything, we had on the decks of that ship and damn near sunk us. I mean this was severe. I had delivered a message to the captain in the pilothouse. As I opened the door to come into the pilothouse, I looked down and I couldn't see the bottom of that wave. We were hit with this stuff for four hours. We finally came out of it. And I remember that night, I began to rethink my priorities, I'll tell you. I think that it was a wake-up call. That was my baptism.

LJ: Really?

RM: Oh yes. Absolutely.

LJ: So that totally changed you that experience.

RM: Absolutely.

LJ: That hurricane?

RM: Yep. It was God grabbing, saying, "You better listen you, jerk. It's true. I'm in charge of your life and that's the way it is." And I said, "Yes sir."

LJ: Good for you.

RM: Yep.

LJ: You survived that.

RM: Oh yes.

LJ: Any other stories stand out to you?

RM: That was a major, I told you about the Gilmore ship.

LJ: Did those 10 o'clock prayers have more meaning after that hurricane?

RM: Oh, absolutely. Oh, I got a story for you that you'll get a kick out of. We're tied up. I had 4 to 8 a.m. watch which didn't mean much because who was going to show up. Beautiful sunrise, nice early summer day and I looked down where we were stationed and way down at the end of the dock I see a man wearing a white suit, white hat and two civilians, one on each side walking with him. It was Harry Truman.

LJ: Wow.

RM: I knew right away who it was. So I told the boatswain mate, weather decks only, do not bite, you'll wake everybody up. Weather decks only. When he gets near our stern, just announce attention to starboard, President of the United States. Which they did and old Harry was waving his hat like this and when he got even where I was, we saluted him and he saluted back - Harry Truman.

LJ: Wow.

RM: Oh yeah.

LJ: That's really a neat, neat moment in history.

RM: Yes, it is. He's an interesting man.

LJ: Good for you. How did you feel about leaving the military?

RM: Well, I was glad it was over. I didn't want to but my cousin stayed. He graduated four classes ahead of me and was also in Key West. And Eddie was four or five months pregnant when he got sent down there. To this day I've never met Eddie or his son. Who would now be 60s I guess, something like that.

LJ: Interesting.

RM: There is a story I want to tell you. History says that John Paul Jones was the youngest commanding officer of a naval vessel. Not true.

LJ: Who was it?

RM: Let me tell you about it. One of the guys from class with me was a little Jewish kid from Brooklyn named Sam Nahaum, N-a-h-a-u-m. Sam graduated in the same class I did and was assigned to a small patrol craft in Key West. The small craft had the commanding officer, an ensign, a chief and about 15 crew members.

Sam shows up on a Sunday morning up in the wardroom scared out of his mind. I mean he looked like he was about to die. And I said, "What's going on." He said, "They just took the boss in for an appendectomy, emergency appendectomy. I'm the CO of this thing. I don't know what to do." So I said, "Do you get along well

with your chief?" "Oh yeah." I said, "You sit down with that chief and you be straight with him. Don't you know, no big shot here. You're the commanding officer now and it's your responsibility. Just let them know that you're ears are open and you're mouth is closed." So he did. Sam was 23 years old when he took command. When he took that position which makes him about a year younger than John Paul Jones.

LJ: Wow.

RM: Isn't that something?

LJ: Very interesting.

RM: It is.

LJ: And very young.

RM: He's 23 going on 17, you know?

LJ: Wow. Interesting. Any other stories that you'd like to share that stand out after all these years?

RM: I hadn't been on board more than about six weeks and the Navy sent out a call for junior officers who had not gone to the Navy Justice School in Newport, Rhode Island, to become familiar with the Uniform Code of Military Justice. This was how discipline was handed out, court marshals and all. So I was sent up to Newport.

Now keep in mind, I'm an ensign, that's the same as a second lieutenant. It's late afternoon and in walks a Marine captain, Paul Dumanthal. I'll never forget it. And he realizes he was going to have to room with an ensign. That's putting him down. He had just come back from Korea. He was in the [undecipherable**] East China landing and all that stuff. Navy graduate, you know from the academy. The next morning 5 o'clock he's got his combat boots on. He said, "Come on Bob, we're going to go run." I said, "What?" He said, "Come on Bob, we're going to go run." I said, "No sir. I'm not going anywhere." "Oh," he said with expletive. So we went out for a half an hour and we ran around the base. Came back, I cleaned up and that was my experience with the United States Marine Corps. I have another story. Is there room for one more?**

LJ: Sure.

RM: I don't know where they came on board but we were cruising near Vieques Island, which is near Cuba. The Navy for years used it as a gunnery range. And our ship had, I don't know why, but we had 40, 50, 60 Marines on board. They were going to use that as a training exercise to land with these landing boats. So my boss called me in. I was assigned communications officer to go with them. They give you a

helmet with a white stripe down the back and it's just like a John Wayne movie. You know you climb down the ladder. Get in the boats. Get lined up. We hit the beach, do whatever you do, dug yourself in, get ready to fire the ammunition over our heads. And the minute I heard the words 'fire,' I put my binoculars on – the minute I did that somebody hit me on the top of my head with my helmet off and the guy yells out, get your bleepin head down, sir.

LJ: Wow.

RM: It was the gunnery sergeant who was in charge.

LJ: Oh my god.

RM: You don't do that. You dig, you crunch up and wait until you hear the explosion. Count to about five and then look, because sands was flying all over the place. That's plenty of time to see if we're hit. Okay. Now we're back on board.

LJ: That's scary.

RM: Yep. back on the quarterdeck. There's a message for me. I've been invited to dinner at the chief's quarters, chief's mess, right?

LJ: Wow.

RM: Pretty good.

LJ: Yeah.

RM: There I am a JG, big stuff. So I made sure I got everything nice and neat and so on. Who's the first guy I meet when I got there? That Marine sergeant.

LJ: Oh, my gosh.

RM: Yeah and he said, "Mr. Mordecai," and I said, "Yes gun?" "We're going to learn you to be a Marine." So I always got a kick out of that.

LJ: That is a great story.

RM: Isn't it. Yeah.

LJ: And you survived that? Wow.

RM: Oh yeah. I still remember I was one of four ensigns on board. And for some reason these other men just could not get along with their chiefs. They had to do what they were told, but not willingly. And they couldn't understand how I never had a problem. And they didn't realize that the rank has nothing to do with you as a

person. It's just how you get paid for what you do, that's all that is. None of the personal stuff. So I always treated Chief Riley with respect and he treated me with respect and we got along just fine. Never caught on. This one guy was commissioned ROTC out of Princeton. Thought he owned the moon.

LJ: Yeah.

RM: Bad.

LJ: So Bob, now what did you say you did after leaving the military?

RM: Okay, then I went into the life insurance business.

LJ: Life insurance.

RM: And tried that in Boston for about six months because my dad was there and you know I wasn't getting anywhere.

LJ: Then you went to Denver**.**

RM: I went to Denver because my brother had gone to Denver several years before, so I joined up with him and went from there.

LJ: What brought you to Moorhead, Minnesota?

RM: Okay, now at 65, I retired in Denver; and it was just, I don't know. There's no limit to how long you can stay in the business - seeing people that's easy. What happens if they say yes, you've got to go to work. Well that's fine when you're brand new but after 40 years you've got a collection of people you can't keep up with, so I quit. Turned it all over to someone else.

And then we moved to York, Nebraska. And I sort of retired there and did odd jobs and one thing and another. And then from there, we went to Lindsborg, Kansas, that's Sweden USA the way it's advertised. We stayed there for a while. My daughter and son-in-law had moved to the Twin Cities. And then my wife had been ill, oh god, four-five years at least. All kinds of stuff from diabetes to rheumatoid arthritis. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't make her better. So she went to live with my daughter and son-in-law in the Twin Cities and then roughly six months later, she died.

LJ: Oh, I'm sorry.

RM: So she was out of that anyway. Well I went to north Kansas, and then up there and lived with them. And then we knew about this place, so we checked it out. She thought that was better than living with them and I was saying, "I don't know." It turns out this was better.

LJ: Good.

RM: They're all, you know, kids my own age.

LJ: Sure.

RM: Or older.

LJ: Bob, how would you like to be remembered?

RM: Oh with a smile. You know. Did the best he could. No regrets.

LJ: Thank you, Bob.